


# RED RIDING HOOD AT SIXTY

Poetry

by  
Suzy Lamson



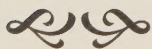


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**by**

**SUZY LAMSON**



**M&Z PRESS**



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This book is dedicated to Shelly, my husband,  
friend and beloved companion

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## Stirrings

I can feel the tickle,  
that first tease of pleasure,  
a bud knotted in green optimism  
and I am taut.

Foreplay of early flowers,  
snowdrops, purple crocus,  
trees in a tender leaf haze  
and I am loosening.

Each time it's the same—  
desire, anticipation, tension.  
Scent of water before a rainstorm  
and I am opening.

The magnolia bursts into pink platters.  
Daffodils trumpet a shout of yellow.  
Orange tulip flutes hold dewy nectar.  
There's the scent of violets

and I am breathless once again.

## Like Sacred Smoke Pluming Toward The Sky

I envy those who believe:  
the ones with the crosses  
whose Sundays are scheduled,  
the ones with stars  
their daytime hours marked by prayers  
and rituals of gratitude.

I envy those who carry totems and charms,  
the rose quartz and crystal,  
who chart their course by lunar months,  
consulting cards and coins before job interviews,  
filling their homes with small shrines.

I seek the sacred in the ordinary,  
find comfort in the unexpected:

a fallen acorn crunched upon the road,  
sea gull cries and the miracle of fresh tomatoes,  
the tingle of stinging winds,  
rain puddles, and baby's toes.

I'd like to read the language of runes,  
or chant in sonorous Latin, decipher  
unaided alphabets of holy text.

Instead I scan the cloud-drifted sky  
and divine symbols in today's wind strewn signs.

## Cross Currents

When I fell in love I blessed the air  
that might have been  
my sweetheart's exhalations.

I drew large breaths  
inhaling him deep  
into my lungs, into my heart.

*Oh, thank you winds  
that carry his invisible messages*  
I murmured.

It did not cross my mind  
during this rhythmic intake  
that I was sending him  
kissed air back.

## There Is No Reprieve From Love

From its ecstasy and lion hungers  
from its heartache and whimpering entreaties.

I have called your name in public,  
proclaimed it in airport waiting lounges  
on billboards and subway posters.

Loud as police bullhorns I've shouted it  
to the midsummer sky  
and, at sun's height of passion  
I've whispered to your lips  
*my beloved, my love*



## Bringing on Tomorrow

I conjure you. With incantations and recipes,  
kneading dough and folding laundry, I conjure.  
I bring a mist, a cloud, a moistness  
to surround you, to encompass and engulf you

in the life of sky and sun and sea.  
I want you to breathe sunlight on leaves,  
moonlight on pine needles and  
moss on bare bark arms;

I want you to feel shore pebbles  
and mountain scree beneath your feet.  
to taste the salt of the ocean and  
sweet of the stream and know their kinship.

I want to walk with you in thunderstorms  
under fire from the sky and howl at the clouds,  
laughing as rivulets run into our eyes  
soaking our heads like old string mops.

When daylight fades behind the hills, we'll  
walk the starlit desert, singing out the moon,  
a charm that resurrects the sun for breakfast  
so we can taste the taste of another day.

## Exquisite Equation

No biology for me  
with its inundation of multiplicities.  
I prefer reductive physics  
compressing life into one exquisite equation:  
You plus Me equals Love

## Breaking the Law

*No two objects can occupy  
the same space at the same time*  
— Attributed to Isaac Newton

At the height of loving, tongues swirl and lick skin.  
Thighs entwine, our four arms — about, around — embrace.

At this merging moment, I am most aware of aloneness.  
A single planet around a single sun,

I send out messengers into deep space,  
seeking life within a vacuum,

in this propulsive, compulsive, explosive  
effort to break the laws of physics.

## Quilter

Ben's been gone for three winters.  
Died while butchering the hog.  
We lived in the country, twenty minutes from town,  
married near sixty years.

The kids are gone, live out of state.  
I stay pretty much to myself nowadays.  
Take care of the garden and chickens,  
haul firewood from the shed.

And I quilt.

Been quilting since I was twenty.

I've made many coverlets

*double wedding ring*

*Garden of Eden*

*log cabin*

for my three boys and six grandkids.

Gifts for birthdays, graduations, weddings.

Last winter I sifted through Ben's flannel shirts-  
frayed collars, worn at the elbows-  
but still sturdy on the front and back.  
Sorted them by colors and patterns:  
    the plaids he wore outdoors  
        the stripes to work  
            the solids to church

Cut the materials into squares and triangles.  
Pieced and sewed me a quilt.

It's done now.  
Soft and warm, like Ben.  
When I'm under it, I feel like he's hugging me.



## **Sleeping with Phantoms**

Tonight we bed and share our sleep with ghosts.  
Enclosed within the shade of your ex-wife  
her curve around my back, S-shaped and familiar  
I settle against your shoulder, nestle beneath your chin.  
You sense my former husband here,  
his silent snore. Together we four lie, amid  
fine thread linens, in warp and woof,  
a weave of then and now.

## Dancing in Bed

How delightful the dance steps of bed:  
First I lie in your arms,  
head against your shoulder.

Then, we turn. You spoon  
me, your belly to my rump,  
one hand cups my breast.

In a tango switch of places  
we reverse. I curl around your back  
face snuggled against your nape.  
We hold position. Sleep encroaches.

Like thank you after evening's final dance,  
we murmur familiar words—  
a ritual that never loses its meaning:

*Goodnight, my darling. Goodnight my love.*

## An Apology

There's a simple explanation.  
I was distracted on the ladder.  
Its rungs are narrow  
and the picture-  
heavy in my hands, askew  
right angle corners tilting.

The hammer,  
the hammer was heavy.  
You know a 4-pound hammer  
isn't the right tool  
for nailing a picture to the wall.

I was holding the hammer in my hand  
paying careful attention to its heft,  
the weight of its head on the shaft.  
I *know* safety.  
But my hand was wet,  
sweaty,  
and the wooden handle slipped  
out my palm's closed grasp  
and fell.

I certainly didn't intend it.  
Surely you understand that.  
You can see how I didn't expect  
you to be standing nearby,  
so close to me  
that the metal head  
flat, squat and heavy  
would land on your toe.  
I don't think anything is broken.

I know you say it hurts  
but lots of people have had loads fall on them.  
This isn't an exceptional experience.  
Then why are you carrying on this way:  
the tears, the wails?  
I explained it all to you.

## Life Saving Measures

I want to undress you  
strip you clean—  
past the word-skin of formality  
to the bones and organs of feeling—  
open and exposed.

My scalpel-sharp heart will delicately probe  
that air-filled reasonableness—  
excise unnecessary “rational” defenses,  
discard dark blockages.

With loving words, I want to mend  
your damaged system, repair  
the rips and tears; apply tender  
life saving measures.



## Reminder: I Love You

I'm caught in my straight jacket of anger.  
Pride ices my lips to a grimace  
and I long for a thaw.

I miss the gush of warm feeling  
the rush of quick smiles  
the crush of our hugs.

But now it's 3 AM and you sleep in adamant stillness.

Our bed has a silent wall in its center.  
I can't bring myself to reach over,  
stretch out a hand, touch your shoulder.

Trapped within this glacial anger,  
I must remember that I love you.

## **I Love More Moderately Now**

I have loved extravagantly.

In bursts of high passion  
I have soared the mountains  
And expanded myself  
    beyond the stars  
    beyond the black universe  
And found great pain.

I love more moderately now.

I will not sob again  
In aching throbs  
Of nightmare hurt  
Nor shall I grow bitterly cynical  
    in an icicle rage.

No,  
I love conservatively now  
Totting my love in careful increments  
Like the grocer's penciled figures  
On the back of a brown paper bag.

My measured love is good for me.  
Like security of a civil service pension  
I plan for my love  
To last through old age.

Oh,  
I'll not seek the magnitude of the stars  
For I have seen the vastness  
And well I know its darkness.

I love more moderately now.

## Sharing the Same Forest

I see the world from five-foot-five  
and you from six-foot-one.  
Through outstretched tree branches  
the sun glares into your eyes  
while I stand under dappled shade.

I am curious as ivy, wild and prodigal;  
you plumb the earth in taproot perseverance.  
A morning lark is not lured by midnight's star  
nor can the night's owl sing the song of dawn.

My universe smiles benignly, gracious  
abundant with possibilities;  
yours thrives on challenge, greets adversity  
as a life or death competition.

Different birds pass each other  
change places in the twilight  
roost in the same tree at different times  
sharing the same forest.

## A Deep Habit

*entangled with each other so...  
together we will outsleep the night.*  
— Insomniac by Galway Kinnell

Well, we argued  
and I stomped out  
in a fire of indignation.

Exercised three miles  
at the gym-  
best record yet.

Home, tired.  
Ire no longer hot  
just an achy ember.

Cautious conversation  
our words flammable as tinder  
in the living room drought.

I retire upstairs to the computer-  
read poetry on line  
discover *Insomniac*.

Loving is a deep habit.  
Even at this polite distance  
Kinnell's words apply.

I print it out.  
Lay the poem upon your pillow.

## Some lovers

snuggle spoon fashion, sleep  
mingled, liana arms vined around  
each other's neck,  
breath humid in the swamp  
of pillows and sheets.  
Their bedroom wallpaper—a tropical print,  
coverlets warm as a Caribbean sun.

Other couples lie rump to rump,  
buttocks touching  
like fresh eggs nested in a basket.  
Their bedrooms have night tables  
stacked with books and note pads,  
personal photos smile down  
the companionable walls.

But we sleep on opposite edges —  
a barren plain mid-center  
large enough to house an imperial army;  
contact rare as continental drift  
in the starched room that needs constant heat.  
We sleep under separate electric blankets  
while drawn shades keep sunlight out.

## Rain in the House

It's raining tears inside our house.  
Silence, a cloud cover, hangs  
below the ceiling.  
I don't know whether  
to boil water or bake casseroles  
for the impending journey.

We move through rooms  
like travelers at a railway station,  
pass each other, without word or eye contact.  
Only intimate body memories remain—  
phantoms of shared  
train rides in adjoining seats.

It's raining cinders throughout the house.  
Sorrow's ashfall covers carpet and chairs,  
cook stove and bedspreads.  
Once shiny with optimism, like  
glistening chrome and rainbow reflections,  
we danced on the kitchen tiles,  
twirled and tangoed on the mattress.  
Laughter lit the corners of every room.

Now dusty, dimming  
the darkened house becomes vacant.

## Civil War

It's over, the long war is over.  
Sometimes it had been a cold one  
of icy words and polar stances;  
other times it had been hot — public tempers,  
broken dishes and voices at furnace pitch.

The packing is complete — her fifty-odd cartons  
of clothes and cookware,  
half the linens and one set of dishes  
stand crated inside the garage. The couch  
and recliner await pick-up service.

Their last night in the same house.  
The house they'd bought twenty-five years ago,  
furnished under fire of differing tastes,  
a tenuous truce zone  
in that quarter century conflict.

Confirmation papers are in the mail.  
The signed dissolution of a union.  
The actual war ended — its skirmishes, battles,  
ambushes and betrayals signed off flatly —  
leaving a tired presence for all but polite exchanges.



*Show me how to balance  
the checkbook,* she requests. He does.

*Show me how to pack a suitcase,  
make a martini,* he asks. She does.

The evening ends in separate beds  
pillowing separate futures  
beneath the joint roof of their past.

## **Tied By Pain and Habit**

The bond of body memory fades—  
I can't recall your touch, your sweat scent,  
the voice tone eludes me.  
But out of my mouth  
words and turns of phrase repeat  
like a phonograph record,  
its needle stuck—  
mindless until noticed  
then lifted up and shifted forward.

## Paleolithic Insomnia

The cave floor is lumpy.  
My mate snores, his legs twitch.  
Once in a while he moans, turns  
this way or that.

The infant mews in his sleep.  
How will this child die?  
Hunger within?  
Or hungry attacks from without?

When the fire was bright I didn't mind  
staring at darkness out the cave's mouth.  
But winter night is long,  
the embers die and blackness invades.

It comes on furred pads  
with claws and feral eyes.

## To My Dad, Abe Lamson, Dead at 46

You've been gone over forty years  
and I'm still scanning the horizon  
looking for bottles with messages,

still gazing at strange men  
(younger now)  
who remind me of you.

You're a photograph of middle age manliness.  
I never had to shout my words  
into a deafening ear,  
never got to see your hair fade  
from pepper into salt,  
nor support a quivering elbow.

I've scoured my memory, grilled friends,  
remaining relatives, and neighbors;  
but no one has further clues.

At fourteen, perceptions skewed  
aslant with first flush hormones  
and the shy pull away from family,  
I couldn't see the man for the father.  
Perhaps it wasn't there, or you wouldn't uncrack.

All I know is, I'm past fifty  
older than you, traveling further  
in a larger world than you ever predicted  
and still looking for you at every arrival gate.

## Kissing Strike

That army photo was taken in 1944  
while you were overseas.  
I was two at the time, you were thirty.  
We didn't meet until you came home.  
The face in the photo isn't familiar.

My memory of your looks is blurred:  
hair receding at the temples,  
faint sprinkle of salt in the dark curls.

But the mustache, ah, that mustache.  
One time Mama and I declared a "kissing strike"  
to compel you to shave.

You must have complied, because  
I remember seeing you in the hospital,  
upper lip pocked with cold sores.  
I might not have noticed them  
beneath a mustache.

In my dreams you are young, younger than I.  
A nice looking man of forty-five,  
especially through these over-sixty eyes.

But in this photo you are movie-star handsome.  
Unsettled, I sneak covert peeks,  
feel as if I'm fourteen,  
shocked that my parents have sex.

## Season of Yahrtzeit

October —  
leaves turn red  
like my first blood flow,  
one month before his death,  
one month before my birthday.

November —  
empty trees stretch skyward.  
I am fatherless three days before  
I am fourteen.

Birthday and Funeral day become one —  
the gray pinstripe dress with peter pan collar  
does double duty.

*Thrift, thrift, Horatio*, I study in class.  
Months move into winter, first semester of grief.

Now Autumn is the season of yahrtzeit.  
A glassed candle burns through the night,  
the presence of one who is present only in dreams.

## Body Memories

My friend was stung by a wasp  
in the tender notch beneath his nose.  
Upper lip swelled round and fat.  
For two days, he walked about  
looking like the aftermath  
of a boxing match.

Three years later  
on a sun-warmed afternoon  
another irate wasp got him —  
this time on the left wrist  
which stiffened, bloated  
double-size with toxins.  
His upper lip swelled again,  
full in reminiscence.

These days your mother is dying  
unraveling in small crises  
and frequent hospital emergencies:  
heart yesterday, kidneys the week before.

This two month decline,  
reverberates my mother's death  
thirty years ago—  
an echo of earlier grief.  
Its refrain a stinging chord.

## Mama

I'm older than you now  
and I've missed you more years  
than those twenty-three  
that I knew you.

I find myself befriending  
elderly women – maybe  
someone who looks like you  
in a progressively-aged portrait.

Perhaps I'll find a person  
who will talk about that era  
we shared in common,  
of which I hold scant memories.

It's a fog of lost opportunities  
damp with tears  
and longing.

And yet ... and yet  
last month you appeared  
in a dream.

It wasn't momentous.  
I heard no trumpet clarion,  
no quotable words.



We spoke in the way  
conversation once interrupted  
picks up again.

I didn't fill you in  
on the past forty years —  
our talk was casual.

When I awakened I couldn't remember  
any particular subject.  
But I am certain

this is the only way  
we'll ever meet again  
in my lifetime.

## In Black Silk

Wearing beaded earrings my older daughter made  
the silver brooch my younger one  
urged me to buy,  
I went to see Mama the other day.

I wore a Timex watch purchased in Oregon,  
an onyx pendant I'd chosen myself  
after the divorce.

On my hands: Grandma's gold  
braided wedding band, the pinky ring  
from my current lover,  
and the diamond solitaire from Grandpa.

My first visit in twenty-five years.  
Not that we'd had a falling out—  
I'd moved to California  
while her bones resided in Long Island.

It took a while to find her, nestled  
between the graves of two older relatives  
within a large section of strangers.

The stone had weathered well;  
rampant yews formed  
a green carpet.

In front of that granite marker,  
I knelt; recounted births and divorce,  
recalled face shapes and family jokes,  
caught her up on the last quarter century.  
Next year when I come, I'll wear jeans.

## Red Riding Hood at Sixty

The wolf is at the door!  
Quick, throw him a lump of meat.

Paws heavy, teeth fierce, he slavers.  
Throw some more flesh,  
a breast perhaps.

Awakening in the dark  
despite silence heavy  
as six feet of snow,  
I hear his howl.

He may not be here,  
but he's always present  
and I clutch my solitary breast,  
breathe deeply  
and pray.

## Radiation Waiting Room – December 9, 2002

*A pink papered room discreetly lit  
mute as a funeral viewing area*

Compliant to the unspoken rule,  
we exchange no words,  
no tears—  
although we are kin.

We share this space—  
these waiting minutes  
that turn to quarter hours,  
stretch into hours.

I would, if I could,  
break the silence,  
open the doors  
our lips keep shut.

I'd speak of the darkness  
and the worms that gnaw there,  
of the early morning questions  
from the night before.

I would share eyes and heart  
with fellow sitters,  
humanity aching in chairs.

## **Tonight Is Your Last Meal!**

You entered in stealth,  
and sneaked bone upward.  
Now grabby, hungry, unstoppable  
you devour me.

But you overdo yourself.  
I am done. I die this evening-  
breath stops, heart stops, blood congeals.  
Cancer, there'll be no more flesh  
for you to feast upon.

## Passing Time

### THE BEGINNING

For a month anxiety rolls around  
like a marble on uneven floors,  
crops up at odd times, in odd places:

Tuesday I slice tomatoes,  
their thin skins severed,  
spilling red juice and seed on the counter.  
*Will he operate?*

Thursday, while folding sheets  
still warm from the dryer,  
I smooth out the creases and wrinkles.  
*What will the scar look like?*

Sunday night I waken from  
the sweat dampened pillow,  
gaze at the glowing clock.  
*How much time will I gain?*

## AFTERWARD

Now it's forty-two days of radiation—  
daily doses in the cancer center  
sequestered in the basement.

Another month to go.  
It's hard to tear off the calendar page  
without wondering,  
*How many more years*  
*will I buy new calendars?*

## A Further Stage

I'm tired of talking about myself,  
a swarm of medical terms and conditions,  
case studies, percentages, odds-  
gnats around a rotten peach.

I'm tired of this regimen of machines.  
Their buzz and click seem innocuous  
yet leave burns that work their way  
inward and outward.

I can't imagine how friends can listen  
without their eyes glazing over.  
They hug me, gently tell me I look well,  
yet *I* see saggy eyes in the mirror.  
I'm tired of myself.

Strangers inquire: What do you do?  
I answer: Occupation-patient, Career-cancer.  
Eventually I hope to leave this job,  
move into the health profession.



## Longing for a Plumb Line

His cancer is in remission.  
Eventually that prefix drops off  
and hungry cells return to multiply.

We won't know if the treatment will work  
or if the price is too high for his body.  
How much must he give  
to thwart their relentlessness?

If he had a heart attack or freak accident  
I'd have a final stab of unresolved fear,  
then the steady pattern of grief.

There'd be no more catch of breath,  
bite in my belly at his every ache and creak.  
A coffin is quiet. Its silence endurable  
to the noise of constant worry.

Now I swing between anxiety and dread—  
a stringed weight that shifts from side to side.  
Perhaps sometime that stone bob  
will suspend-mid-point in its arc.

Oh, for a still plumb line!

## Cancer Center Waiting Room

You could almost mistake it for Lourdes.  
People in wheel chairs; caretakers  
pushing gently, heads leaning over the handles.

Patients tote portable oxygen tanks;  
clear tube trails from the cylinder to their nose.  
Some enter limping, leaning on canes;  
others bald, bandaged, or scarred.

Each wait for their name to be called  
And all, all are radiant—  
eyes full of hope and fear.

## Poem to Die For

*I could kill for that dress*  
Knife slashes;  
blood spurts fountains  
out the black fitted bodice.  
Droplets fall on the white taffeta skirt.

*I bought a pair of drop dead shoes*  
She strolls into the upscale restaurant,  
confident, sexy in her red stilettos.  
Suddenly she falls forward, face flat to the floor.  
The doctor arrives; pronounces her dead.

*We have time to kill*  
Down the aisle  
past a jewelry counter of watches  
their winding gears pulled out –  
a grandfather clock complacently ticks.  
A man draws his gun; fires three shots.  
One enters the maple torso;  
two pierce its Roman face.  
Steel hands fall limply to 6:30.

The waiter brings a slice of chocolate cake to our table.  
One forkful – *Oh, it's to die for!*

## Preparations

I don't want to be the first nor the last  
attending funerals like a professional mourner.  
I don't want any of us to go,  
but since we must,  
I suggest we choose our own deadline.

Let's rent a large hall, battered and worn,  
with a weak ceiling.  
Have a party:  
Turn the music up loud, forsake our hearing aids,  
jiggle in souped-up wheelchairs  
to the Rolling Stones, Grateful Dead.

Maybe skip the entertainment entirely.  
Use our own voices, retell the stories,  
the jokes, the drug arrests;  
catch up on years  
since we last were together.

We'll show photos of grandchildren  
and great grandbabies;  
discuss our aches, swap meds.

Eat greasy cheeseburgers,  
salted fries, ice cream  
(the real stuff—nothing low-fat).  
Serve a sheet cake decorated in candles  
of our collective ages—  
a genuine conflagration.

With any luck,  
a perfectly timed tornado  
will roar through; the roof will collapse.  
We'll all die together so  
our children share the insurance money.

*Oh, won't that be glorious!*

I tell my daughter, who offers  
to stand at the door, greet the guests:  
"Check your hat? Your coat? Your will?"

## **And No Body For Comfort**

Trapped within  
a celestial contest-  
a pawn of a pawn-  
Job's wife must  
mourn her children alone.

Her arms ache for comfort,  
to grieve, cradled within  
a husband's embrace-perhaps,  
even share tears.

But boil-ridden, wretched,  
beset by unseen loyalty  
Job looks only heavenward.

## The Patience of Mrs. Job

There you sit, silently scraping  
sores that sting like camel spit.  
Our sons and daughters are dead  
swallowed by the wind;  
the livestock's raided,  
the servants gone

and I scrub pots in the sand,  
weep gritty tears,  
while you just sit there  
scraping, scraping.

I envy your faith—  
*The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away*  
*Blessed be the Lord*  
But I am lost,  
uncomforted that you cannot  
accept my need to comfort you.

## Offerings

It was a generous offer  
*Curse God and die.*

Who else but one who loves  
would suggest escape  
of such magnitude?

Who else would willingly  
endure widowhood  
for the sake of his release?

Who, but one who loves —  
rebuked into silence  
must watch mutely,

seek no hugs,  
refrain from touching  
his festering body?



## The Last Temptation

Her mouth opened  
and other words came out—  
neither grief or sorrow,  
nor shock or pain.  
Instead another trial  
cloaked in impatience:  
*Curse God and die*, she croaked.

Harsh words for a harsh lot.  
She has no name in this drama  
She speaks Satan's words,  
whispers in Job's ear  
a final temptation  
before the comfortless comforters arrive.

## Arbeit Macht Frei

*("Work Makes You Free" – sign over the entry gates  
at Dachau and Auschwitz concentration camps)*

It wasn't  
loading the rocks  
from the quarry bottom  
lugging them  
shoulder on shoulder  
up the cliffside that killed him;

it wasn't reaching the top  
to turn around  
to carry them back  
to the quarry floor  
and place them down  
before heaving them up  
for another uphill trek–

even that didn't kill him.

It was knowing  
that the purpose  
of those fourteen-hour  
purposeless days  
was meant to kill him.

## And They Were Cold

And they were hungry  
and the bunks were hard  
warmed only  
by the skinny-buttocked bedmates.

And they were tired  
and they were frightened  
and scared of their fatigue-  
a stone-heavy tiredness  
whose weight birthed more fear.

And the days moved gray  
between despair and death-  
terror, its riding crop  
when they saw  
their campmates herded

in lines,  
enter doorways  
into closed chambers  
and never, never walk out again.

## In the Shower

Soap slivers skinny toward the drain.  
Luxuriating beneath hot spray  
I don't bother to retrieve them.

After the peach scented shampoo,  
the soaping and rinse,  
I turn the hot faucet off  
stand under cold water

in a tribute to my relatives  
for whom entering the showers  
meant going off to die.

## **Since We've Met Life Has Become More Dangerous**

Auto accidents and plane crashes,  
earthquakes and fallen power lines—  
possibilities for heart attack,  
broken hip, sudden stroke.

Brute mortality stands before me—  
a traffic cop's outstretched hand.  
Every day has potential for loss.

So I chant mantras for your safety  
at crosswalks and street corners,  
include prayers before bed.

Every morning brings your sunlight smile—  
a fresh day for worry and joy.  
Despite unexpected and unbalanced odds,  
love transcends catastrophe.

## We'll Always Have Safeway

Post surgery instructions:

Patient needs to be ambulatory.

So they told him to get up and walk,  
walk around the house. If space is limited  
take longer walks outside.

We left our one-room apartment  
drove to the supermarket.

He strolled up and down the aisles  
holding onto a shopping cart

hands clutching its aluminum handle  
as he moved in a straight line.

I accompanied him; alert  
for stumbles, watchful for fatigue.

Soft muzak wafted about—  
elevator music, the kind you hear but  
seldom really notice.

It was in the paper goods aisle  
Bounty on one side, wax paper and foil  
on the other, that I asked  
*Do you really have to hold onto the cart?*

With two fingers of his right hand  
he grandly pushed the carriage away.  
It rolled eight feet to the paper napkins  
angling in on the picnic cups.

A soft foxtrot was in the air.  
He turned, opened his arms wide in invitation.  
I accepted; put my hand on his shoulder,  
left palm nestled against his right.

We danced from paper towels to plastic ware.  
Aisle 16, it will always be ours.

## Squeaking Through

Like completing the crossword puzzle  
when I didn't know the down definition-  
though I could fill in all those across-  
I have squeaked through.

Once more we weathered the storm  
not by carrying umbrella or boots  
but sheer luck; a stone outcropping  
under which we huddled blindly,

while the winds howled.  
Trees whipped sideways  
and within that scared core,  
it rained dread.

You survived-  
not due to my finest efforts  
or despite my stupidity-  
but because sometimes  
lightning bolts are underpowered,  
or the gods are distracted  
by greater events.



## Ordinarily

Ordinarily dining with a friend  
at Claire's vegetarian restaurant  
is occasion for celebration,

but today when I grab a meal  
between your blood tests and EKG,  
it's merely a break from the visitor's room.

Ordinarily I turn on my cell phone  
only to call you when I'm delayed  
or that the market is out of your favorite bread,

but today it's in my pocket, charged and on.  
I jump at any ring tone,  
await a call from your cardiologist.

Ordinarily I enjoy overnights at a retreat.  
A child with an extra cookie, I revel  
in the luxury of staying up late, sleeping alone,

but after they insert the IV port,  
wheel your gurney to an upstairs room  
and I kiss you goodnight, I drive home  
where our bed is hugely empty and I miss your snores.

Ordinarily I complain that the room is overheated,  
sleep naked next to you,  
but tonight I wear flannel pajamas,  
keep the phone within easy reach.  
Nothing is ordinary anymore.

## After the Funeral

He said:  
She didn't exercise often enough.

From another:  
Her cholesterol was high  
and she *still* ate cheese.

Then her sister:  
I told her, I warned her  
wear a scarf in December, floss nightly,  
and *lower* those stress levels.

Everyone nodded,  
as if casting incantations  
could dispel the inevitable.

## The Date

*One morning the servant saw Death wave to him in the marketplace. Frightened, he borrowed a horse from his master and fled, arriving that evening in Samarra where again he met Death. "Why did you wave at me this morning," the man inquired. "I was surprised to see you there since I knew we had an appointment in Samarra this evening."*

Persian Tale – retold by W. Somerset Maugham

In my rear view mirror,  
the semi looms up fast,  
menacing as an armed terrorist.  
Is this my Samarra?

Walking where murky windows  
shutter out the sleepless, I hear  
footsteps tread the cobblestones  
and scanning alleys and doorways  
for mole hole hideaways,  
I wonder, is this my Samarra?

Riding sixty-story elevators I muse  
over broken cables. Wary of loose pebbles,  
I edge carefully the canyon's rim,  
watch for Death's fingering smile.  
Is this my Samarra?

## At the Restaurant

That tag-  
the shirt label that pokes  
white at his nape  
like a bare billboard  
along the interstate.

Small in the grand scheme of things  
but from an overview

seeing the back of his head,  
the straggle of gray hairs needing a cut  
or at least a loving reminder,  
that untucked label looms large-

shouts lonesome louder  
than any table for one.

## Sweaters

On the Aran Islands where waves  
dash deadly against barren rocks  
and fishing boats often fail to return,  
a widow waits.

Fingers knitting, she counts time  
in pattern stitches: 1 knit, 2 purl,  
a cable, then a bobble  
a cable, then a bobble.

Each household bears its own  
knitted mark of kin.

One day a sodden body  
beaten by waves, gnawed by fishes  
will wash against the mottled rocks;  
and a son now like his father  
is identified by hand knit clues.

## Traitor

One of you shall betray me.

Who?

Stomach? Lungs?

Heart? Colon or liver?

Ah, liver, I knew you'd sell out  
for the silver-frothed beer.

*Back then was a time of contests  
tests of manliness –  
show me the bottle  
and I'd prove my bones.*

*But now, I'm born again,  
a believer in the truth: clean living  
and balanced food groups.*

*Why should my past  
raise its evil spirit?*

Liver, I know, sure as I'm sitting  
shooting, spitting  
that you'll turn on me  
lead the charge downhill.

## Form and Content

In the hospital room  
well-wishing flowers line the window ledge,  
while Marian holds court.  
Bed-ridden, cancer riddled,  
her purple skin dangles limply  
from chicken-wing forearms  
(*transfusion bruises*, she explains).

Outside in antiseptic corridors  
painted impersonal green,  
the doctor speaks  
monochrome statistics:  
platelet count, SGPT results,  
all moving into the danger zone  
where the worst must be confronted.  
We nod comprehension.

She speaks of going home tomorrow,  
or maybe the day after—  
at worst by next weekend.  
We nod agreement and promise  
to visit her there.

What shall we say in our friend's presence:  
the form of science, or the content of the heart?

## Grief Knows No Schedule

October Tuesday they buried him;  
I cried on Wednesday.  
Saturday arrived in mournful black.  
When friends came to comfort, I sat,  
replying in even tones, rote words—  
and sobbed alone all Sunday.

The holidays caroled red and tinsel. I called  
California, interrupted Christmas dinners  
weeping through phone lines, blowing  
my nose at New Year's midnight.

Grief respects no calendar—  
spring sprouted a soothing beauty.  
Lulled by plum blossoms  
and crocus outcroppings,  
I watched a Doris Day comedy,  
left the cinema with swollen eyelids.

On a dry Memorial Day I visited the grave,  
read the neighboring inscriptions, left a pebble  
offering on his headstone—all without tears.



But sorrow lingered  
tough as last year's blackberry vines.  
July brought thunderstorms; loss  
bolted angry lightning out my mouth,  
friends flinched. Alone, I cringed with shame  
hiding my grief in hurricane cellars.

Autumn approaches. The summer dies  
in orange flashes and I stand here,  
waiting in gray shadows  
for the winter snows to come.

## Death of the Queen

Who would have guessed the era  
would die twice.

First when our leader,  
auburn-haired, light-eyed, too young  
fell suddenly to a squinted rifle shot.

Civil servants scrambled and the country  
mourned the passage of an era:  
*Camelot is lost, a Golden Age gone,*  
shocked pundits tearfully proclaimed.

But then, thirty years later,  
his widow died. The woman  
with wide-set eyes and demure hats  
whose pink-linen lap held  
that cowlicked head, bleeding,  
dying in multiple TV reruns.

She was the dark-eyed widow,  
veiled in silent dignity  
when one by one his paramours  
and one-night stands were exposed.

Queen of devoted motherhood and good taste,  
she strolled the power streets  
of international cities—  
in smoky sunglasses and elegant posture.

Now she's gone; that Golden Age lost again.  
This time we mourn the passing of illusion—  
that age of manners, privacy, and the certitude  
of how a woman behaves.

## Sylvia at Eighty-Seven

Dinner was once an elegant meal—  
starched napkins and polished sterling.  
There were small-handled butter knives  
and individual pickle forks.

Now her eyes—big behind thick lenses—  
can't see tablecloth stains  
or crumbs beneath the chairs' oak feet.  
She moves slowly, rises carefully;  
knees protest the strains  
of eighty-seven years.

The hall closet has a musty odor  
and the scent of Lysol overlays the bathroom.

Age confers certain privileges,  
yet clings to familiar protocols.  
Although the napkins are paper  
and the silverware is dull and tarnished,

she still insists on serving  
graciously as always.

## Penelope's Complaints

Left behind with the child. *Damn.*  
Little boy shoots arrows in the sand  
while He serves honor by horse and ship.

"Guard my kingdom," he said  
grasping his sword close as a kiss.  
"My fiefdom relies on your loyalty," *Damn.*

Those suitors keep calling, arrive at mealtimes.  
Noble declarations as they size up the dinnerware.  
"Tomorrow," I promise, shuttle skittering  
across the loom threads. *I hate weaving.*

Twenty years of nightly unravels.  
I'm tired of slipping between and under,  
tired of broken threads and long-strung vows.  
*I need more rest.*

And now old Argus barks: some ragman  
at the gate begging a meal.  
Another seat at the table,  
another bowl and mug. *Damn.*

## Designer Name

What should we name her?  
Something biblical—  
Rachel, Rebecca, Sarah—  
throwback to our forebears?  
Maybe an old-fashioned name  
Susan, Emily, Joan  
Or a noun of virtue  
Felicity, Hope, Joy

Consider a geographic term  
Montana, Georgia  
No one ever names a girl  
Connecticut.  
We could call her Connie—  
who would ever guess?

Or go unisex:  
Leslie, Taylor, Bailey  
Once male-only names  
now a four-year old in pink skirt  
and rhinestone tiara proclaims  
"I'm Princess Avery"

Then there's Jewel and Amber  
Ruby and Pearl  
or perhaps some movie star  
Ava, Lana, Marilyn, Meryl

Hundreds of books  
list thousands of names,  
their etymologies and meanings.  
Let's go to the bookstore.  
Why is it important? you say

Why do you ask, Destiny?

## Compliments

Hippies in the woods in a surplus army tent  
set on rough hewn flooring.  
Dark comes early and my four-year old sleeps  
amid adult talk, kitchen noise.

In the night she wakes;  
smells of homemade donuts  
sizzle the air.

I invite her to join us. Teacup eyes, she nods,  
round face sober with sleep, seats herself  
at her child-height table, chews thoughtfully  
the warm fried dough, sticky with powdered sugar.

Security warms her like the wood stove in winter.  
Without warning she offers:

*Sometimes I don't like you.*

Honored, I reply:

*Sometimes I don't like what you do,  
but I always love you.*

Her mind chews more slowly than her mouth  
as she accepts my words, as I accept her compliment.



## Landmarks

I remember her first smile,  
drool seeping out the corner of her mouth.  
And that wobbly first step,  
herald of scabs and self-sufficiency.

There was the red-circled date  
of kindergarten's start, and later  
her shy announcement of first blood.

But when was the last morning we cuddled?  
And why didn't I notice the day those plump fingers  
turned slender, or the last time she asked for permission?

There was no declaration  
when she preferred to read silently to herself,  
reach for items on the top shelf without help.

Lasts are different monuments from firsts.  
They appear without proclamation,  
becoming larger in our mind's eye,  
like landmarks magnified  
in memory's rear view mirror.

## Museum of the Future

Up on the Acropolis, high porch over Athens,  
the Caryatid maidens stand forever  
frozen in carved beauty.  
Their poised heads silently support  
the roof's marble ledge.

It's been said that if you stare hard,  
their sculptured youth will change:  
smooth faces line with wrinkles of winters past,  
bellies sag and hips widen, knees callus  
from the bows and kneelings to ancient protocol.

There came a hot July day of her sixteenth year,  
when smooth fleshed and beaming, my daughter  
entered my bedroom. I, work tired, lying face up naked  
in the shaded late afternoon heat  
saw her stare at me, remote as the desert.  
Alien as foreign currency  
she assessed my breasts-flattened wide on the chest.

I saw her gaze lengthen and time slip forward.  
Her face showed no comment, her eyes thoughtful  
reading the future of her body  
through mine.  
Nothing said, she left silently and I,  
a museum of the future alone on display,  
missed my loving tourist.

## Intimations of the Future

*for my daughter Shasta*

And now when your daughter  
-fifteen, hormones throbbing-  
rages, cries, and threatens to run away  
unless you let her date  
that high school redneck

I smile, accept your apologies  
as you recall arguments with me  
some thirty years ago.

I know you'll hurl  
those same words at her —  
*I wish you a daughter just like you*

Some call it a curse,  
I call it a blessing.

## Time's Mirror

*for Sue*

### I

After high school, we married our boyfriends,  
settled in, made babies, raised children,  
lived the mid-twenties domestic life.

In the prime of middle age,  
big-bosomed, we filled out  
in body, firmed up opinions,

watched our slim unruly daughters  
navigate their adolescence.  
They were lithe, vibrant, shiny haired.

We were the graying Old Guard,  
observing them. We exchanged  
private joy as they flowered.

Your daughter married,  
had babies of her own. And you  
moved up the matriarchal ladder.

Now we live thousands of miles apart,  
speak often by phone, see each other  
every three years or so. A catch-up visit,  
occasionally graced by your daughter's presence.

Maternal herself, she's fleshed out:  
body thickened, hips widened,  
her hair with hints of gray.

She looks like you did twenty years ago.  
When I visit with both of you  
I could be seeing you twice over.

## II

Time's mirror moves backwards  
when I look at your daughter.

The you of then cradles a new child  
in front of the present you.

Thirty years ago  
we nursed each other's daughters.  
Now I watch this former you  
smile bemusedly and murmur "My son."

The you of now gazes, eyes crinkled  
with grandmotherly pride.  
I am in two places at the same time.

I see the same woman, same matrilineal genes  
yet two women in one place.

Time swirls in circles  
simultaneously breathing  
and holding its breath.

## My Grandmother was a Cultured Woman

She held a rose between her teeth  
and hummed an aria from Carmen  
as the boat docked at Ellis Island  
where her husband stood waiting.

Full-bosomed, blessed with cleavage  
even high collars couldn't conquer,  
she likened her personal history  
to chapters in a Tolstoi novel.

She spoke in italics  
and when angry, in boldface.

She talked to me only in English,  
yet she cursed a sly chess move in Russian,  
argued volubly with *Zaida* in Yiddish,  
kept secrets from my mother in Polish,  
and sang lullabies to my daughter in French.  
She told me she'd read Hebrew as a child.

A woman of eclectic romanticism,  
Grandma displayed her beach treasured sea shells  
on windowsills and coffee tables,  
while her silver comb and brush set  
lay forgotten in a dresser drawer.

## Prima Donna Goddess

It's not the rose or wisp of aria that remind me of her.  
I took romance for granted the way milk  
goes with cereal, and one must bathe nightly.  
Nor the woman of fashion-plate waist  
that is sealed in the amber of myth.

Grandma rose above personal legend  
to the place of family deity,  
replete with ladle and paring knife-  
curved thin from use.

Immortal in her flowered kitchen apron,  
like beneficence from a god she waves  
a soup spoon, dispenses dollops of advice,  
secretly slips me a five dollar bill  
stashed within her pocket after the Sunday dinner.

There were days when wrathful, she flung  
soup plates at the kitchen door,  
declared she was "moving back to the old country."  
She only got as far as the lobby elevator  
before concerns that the pilot light was out,  
or the gas jets still on, forced her return.

No one took her seriously,  
not even *Zaida*, who adored her dramatics  
the way he loved Tom Mix westerns.

Hearthstone deity, idol to us all,  
even a goddess can have bad days.

## Yard Sale

It's like a yard sale, Susan said.  
You put everything of yourself out-  
displaying the best, a bit ashamed  
of the rusty-edged parts.

And your children walk by  
picking and choosing:  
the humor, the temperament,  
ambition, worldliness.  
They finger a quirky trait  
purchase a tattered memory-  
some wobbly item,  
pass up the sterling.

You want to grab them  
by the collar  
or jean pocket,  
beg them to take a particular piece.

"I'll even pay you," you offer,  
knowing, out of politeness perhaps  
they'll carry it away,  
only to dump in the trash barrel  
beyond our view.



## Creative Evolution

She was lean and intense;  
her poetry sharp toned with yearning.  
When she performed

words of pain and unmet desire  
spilled out before the waiting  
breath-held audience.

Then she became pregnant,  
body rounded, language was soft and hopeful,  
her poems like her breasts were full.

The baby born, she sat in the nursery  
for long hours. Still, gazing and stroking.  
Words fled at the sound of a tiny cry.

At five her son is in school-part time-  
brief hour respite, an opportunity to write.  
But she finds she can't.

Instead she bakes and decorates cakes.  
She paints murals in the child's room  
masterpieces in fairy tale themes-

barehanded heroes who battle giants and ogres,  
striving for triumphant success.

## Advice on How to Catch a Husband

Grandma says, *Invite him to dinner.*  
*Serve potato latkes. He won't be able to resist.*  
Potato pancakes, entrée of great sacrifice:  
Blood, tears and sweat.

Blood – shred the potatoes  
on a metal hand grater.  
Offer your knuckles to the steel-toothed board.

Tears – onions, ah, the onions.  
Weep when you peel or grate them.  
Proof that you labor to please him.

Sweat – grating, frying,  
the hot oil that splatters  
makes a dish for his delight.

*The latkes are so good, he'll propose on the spot.*  
*Besides, they're so heavy, he can't leave the table until he does.*

## Lost Chord

Great Aunt Paulie  
invented the "Lost Chord" soup,  
perfection never replicated  
a sprig of dill, a pinch of spinach  
the just-so proportion of vegetables to stock.

She'd a temper  
fierce as her matzoh balls were hard.  
Her sister, my Auntie Esther  
served dumplings soft and mushy,  
melting at the spoon's dull edge.

Completing the familial menu  
were Grandma's comfortably firm *knaidles*.  
Her fame rested on forgetfulness:  
no matter the occasion,  
no matter the chicken or brisket entrées,  
the three styles of potatoes and extra side dishes,  
she always forgot one course,  
discovered, tardily, chilling in the icebox.

Sepia photos show a triumvirate  
of full-bosomed women:  
Legends in their time and on into mine.

I pass that eighty year legacy to my daughter  
who praises my tofu stir fry  
and raves about my gingerbread,  
having never tasted *Yiddishe* matzoh ball soup.

## Family Recipes

It was a family tradition:  
burnt carrots and charred lamb chops.  
Big-bosomed immigrant sisters played chess  
interminably  
at the kitchen table—  
oblivious to smells or smoke  
billowing from the scolding stove.

Their children,  
cousins returning from school  
were un-alarmed;  
inured to smoke sneaking under the kitchen door  
or through glaziered window points,  
they'd set their books down  
and glance casually at the chess board,  
schooled enough  
not to interrupt  
the vast concentration.

Years later, my mother confessed  
a liking for burnt carrots  
for its blackened caramel  
and sweet acrid scent.  
Although she never deliberately  
braised a batch, I learned  
to keep a sharp eye on the stove burners.

Now forty years in retrospect,  
I occasionally eat lumpy oatmeal  
conjuring loving memories  
of childhood breakfasts  
during my school years.

Ah, family traditions!

## Enchantment

At the dining table she sits propped high,  
bolstered by city phone books.  
Solemn-faced she listens  
to Grandmother's tales of adventure.

Ears open to all syllables,  
mouth agape, her eyes like prey  
transfixed on the snake's sinewy dance.

After each close call the voice chants  
*Another bite of meat, eat more carrots.*  
A forkful approaches her face.

Under the spell of household fairy tales  
her mouth obediently opens,  
chews and swallows.

At last stories can't coax another mouthful.  
Like the defiant pig in a straw house  
the little voice asserts  
*No more. Don't want no more.*

The gray-haired woman lifts the plate,  
hand motions slow and weighted.  
Eyes moist, she appeals  
*Won't you eat one last bite?*

A captive goose chained by love  
the little girl opens her mouth  
for yet another morsel.

## **Wild I was,**

wanton in my tastes  
and desires

Inhibitions flown  
all restraints gone  
control lost

I tried everything...  
and more than once.

Mouthfuls of odd combinations  
salt and tangy  
crunchy and sweet

going back  
for seconds, then thirds

At first I was genteel,  
small portions artfully arranged  
handled with delicate forkfuls



Then as I discerned my likes  
I mounded the plate-

Corn pudding, fried chicken  
mashed potatoes, roast beef  
brown gravy and horseradish sauce.

Brownies, pecan pie,  
the make-your-own-sundae  
its ski run of whipped cream.

I recall my resolution: abstinence,  
or at least selectivity,  
setting some limits.

But all that went to hell  
when I lost it at the buffet.

## Sensing the Melon

I learned  
to search for beige nubbled rind,  
knock on its skin doorway  
listen for a hollow sound.  
With firm thumb pads  
I pressed its fontanelle,  
squeezing its round cheeks.

It wasn't until I lifted  
it to my face, nosed its fruity scent  
that I felt confident slicing  
the fleshy globe  
into orange hemispheres  
whose meat dripped sweet juice  
onto my waiting tongue.

## Selecting a Lover

Some go by looks,  
others by appearance,  
gravitating toward natty dressers,  
tango dancers. But I like  
a fellow with a fine tongue.

I don't care if he's virile as Montana  
square-jawed and strong,  
I want a man of smooth words—  
be they silver or gold,  
waxing Liberal or Tory,  
awash in ancient history or science fiction.  
I like a man with a good verb.

I'm a poet you see, easily snagged  
by an image, or metaphoric conceit.  
Caught in the rhythms of daily speech,  
the pathos of a pithy epigram

I've this weakness:  
I can be had by a man with a good verb.

## **In Praise of Maytag**

No more quarters! I'm done with quarters.  
I'm done with Laundromats-  
the washers, the dryers, the coin-op dispensers.  
No more quarters.

No more caches of change  
stashed in glass canning jars.  
No metal chorus jingling in my pocket,  
bulging out my coin purse.  
No green-wrapped cylinders  
rolling heavy in the bottom of my handbag.  
No more quarters.

No more silver profiles.  
Those patriarchal icons,  
Fathers of our Country  
whose hands never touched soiled wash,  
never struggled, awkward with duffels  
of unsegregated white and colored cottons.  
No more. No more.

"LIBERTY"

the raised coin letters read.

Now, unhampered by store closed signs,

the search for a parking space or an operational dryer,

I saunter into my laundry room

-a portrait of domestic tranquility-

I rhumba to rhythms of rinse & spin

Rinse & spin.

Turning easily I sing:

No more quarters. No more quarters.

No quarter given.

## **The Sock Fairy Has Struck Again**

I can accept one gray sock gone-  
its widowed mate lying lonely in the drawer,  
or the black and white striped anklet  
that re-marries another lost soul  
from the singles bag-  
even my formal blue stocking,  
textured and unmatchable, transforms  
into a high-class travel purse for jewelry.

But when a pillow case is missing,  
that's going too far!  
This capricious gremlin  
has over-stepped itself,  
moved from realms of domestic mystery  
to the darker, sleepless side of household gothic.

## **There Are No Secrets In November**

The firebird foliage reveals nests  
no longer concealed  
among its camouflage colors.

No creature travels unheard.  
The downed leaves crunch  
underfoot in brittle whispers.

We dance, ebullient  
on the brown and yellow parquet lawn.  
Organic explosions crisp the air.

One last fling of earnest ducks, raucous crows,  
and numerous small-wingèd ones  
spatter the bare tree sky.

Autumn winds rustle  
herding stray clouds north  
across the nude blue spread.

## Objects That Multiply

I bought only eight  
settings of plastic tableware,  
but the knives have gone wild  
and flimsy white teaspoons sprawl  
within my odds & end drawer.

It's the same with paperclips,  
which some claim are the larval  
stage for wire coat hangers  
that lie in a tangle on my closet floor.

I'm told they hatch, pupae fashion,  
into bicycle parts—spokes and bent rims  
strewn along garage shelves next to spare  
tires, limp as used engine gaskets  
that dangle from utility hooks.

My anklets and knee-highs propagate  
in dresser drawers, birthing more socks  
one at a time, like farmers in third world  
countries attempting to ensure for old age.

Surely this phenomenon isn't confined  
to me. Tell me of duplicates,  
the replicates that prepare for winter  
in this summertime of our lives.



## Late October

The trees' thinned branches  
splinter a crisp sky,  
unveil hidden nests.  
Leaves form a speckled  
brown and yellow tarp-cover.

The season of yard sales is over.  
Gone the door and sawhorse tables  
laden with old kitchenware,  
outgrown baby clothes, dog-eared paperbacks.  
We've nothing more to discard.

Expansive summer has ended.  
We close in tightly  
conserving our warmth  
for the winter ahead.

## Respectfully Yours

His eyes glittered and sparkled  
at the mention of Glenn Miller's  
big band music.

His creased lips tightened  
at a reference  
to the Spanish Civil War,  
and tears shone on his cheeks  
when the bombing  
of Dresden was discussed.

I listened respectfully,  
eyes dry and lips cool.

Yet,  
when I smile and speak  
of bell bottoms and The Grateful Dead  
to some tattooed, double-earringed  
young man,  
or my throat hoarsens  
at My Lai or Martin Luther King,  
I notice his eyes are dry  
and lips are cool.

## **Mysterious as Saturn**

From twenty feet away  
my friend opens the car door.  
She can even roll down the windows,  
start the engine-  
mysterious as the rings on Saturn.

My car is older than hers.  
I must insert the key into the door lock,  
turn a quarter-turn clockwise,  
and wait  
for tumblers to fall in place,  
the definitive click of a latch opening.

Since we car pool often, using hers,  
the more comfortable, convenient vehicle,  
I find myself squeezing my car key  
as I approach my sedan.

Nothing happens. Somewhere in Peoria  
a 2004 blue Chevy Camaro unlocks.

## Retiring the Old Mare

The car turned twenty this past April.  
A sleek, tan sports job  
once showroom new, curried and tended  
with 2,000 mile oil changes and weekly washes.  
It survived screeching corners  
and multiple brake linings.

Bedded in the favored garage stall,  
it resided in fossil fuel dignity.  
No grocery bag rested on its trunk.  
No garden rake leaned against the hood.  
*I'll keep it forever*, he said.

But age crept into the alternator.  
Now the clutch slips; a hacking cough  
protests the click of the ignition.  
It's sullen and recalcitrant.

Worse yet, a new red car parks  
in the right hand space  
deposes the old mare to the curb  
where rust nibbles at the chassis belly  
and paint bubbles pimple the fenders.

Its destiny? The glue factory of junk-  
the one-ton body interred  
among other unfortunates, compacted  
into steel cubes, tires heaped  
in funeral mounds.

All that remains is the license plate  
fading in an attic carton.

## In a Single Bed

She lies in a single bed  
still not used to it,  
widowed several decades ago.  
Through winter and summer

still not used to it.  
Laundry piles up slowly.  
Through winter and summer  
washes are seldom.

Laundry piles up slowly  
a month between beauty parlor visits-  
washes are seldom  
where someone's hands massage her.

A month between beauty parlor visits,  
her hair shampooed and styled,  
where someone's hands massage her-  
touch she regularly counts on.

Her hair shampooed and styled,  
she looks forward to her semi-annual doctor visit,  
touch she regularly counts on,  
her blouse open, chest bared to the stethoscope.

She looks forward to her semi-annual doctor visit,  
cool fingers upon her wrist.

Her blouse open, chest bared to the stethoscope,  
she lies naked on a paper-covered table,

cool fingers upon her wrist.

She willed her body to science.

She'll lie naked on a paper-covered table  
while unknown students examine her.

She willed her body to science

(widowed several decades ago)

while unknown students examine her.

She lies in a single bed.

## A Seedy Soul

With a job career as varied  
as his checkered sport coat,  
he scraped by-  
barely.

He preferred the night shift  
when driving a cab —  
returning drunk “niggers” to Harlem,  
rolling them as they staggered  
out the hack door.

His credo:  
*Always remind the passenger  
if he forgets his change.  
Rap real loud on the window  
... with a feather.*

He would have been a bouncer  
except his body wasn't dense enough.  
Short, wiry, he resembled  
a small time hoodlum-  
faded mustache and diamond pinky ring.

One time he opened a liquor store  
on the shady edge of town  
but had to close when the customers  
complained the house brand too weak,  
and stopped coming in.



Diagnosed with kidney cancer,  
cells cannibalizing each other  
his weight dropped. He turned mean.  
To inquiries from neighbors,  
he'd spit: *I'm dying, you blood suckers.*

He had no faith; couldn't protest  
the Deity's unfairness—  
his death before his wife's,  
that whiny invalid  
he'd nursed for seven years.

Refusing to allow her to visit,  
he died alone in a hospital room.

## Picking Through Men's Nightwear At Good Will

Some smell musty, but I trust they're clean.  
I don't mind second-hand pajamas in red and white  
striped flannel with saggy-waistband bottoms.  
It's seersucker bathrobes that get me.

In thinning years  
as age and strength move in opposite directions,  
weakened arms labored to lift the lightweight robe  
onto bony shoulders.

What was once donned in a careless gesture,  
arrogant as a prizefighter's wave,  
hangs limp about the torso.

One time those clothes were new,  
purchased in a casual moment,  
perhaps received on a birthday or Father's Day-  
optimistic as tomorrow's sunshine.

Now they slump on bent wire hangers  
where the thrifty go to shop.

## The Last Report

Did you hear the sound  
before the bullet penetrated?  
Was your final thought  
*At last*, or mute relief?

How many tries?  
How many unsuccessful attempts?  
It's symbolic to fail at suicide-  
but four times!

Well, you finally succeeded.  
Clean, one shot, a neat hole  
with no messy edges.  
The only hint you weren't napping  
was your cyanic-blue lips.  
You smiled at last.

I was afraid you could still hear me  
as I called from the door sill for help.  
So I pointed my index finger  
to my temple, pop-gun style  
saying it all  
without one word-  
just the way you did.

## Candles

When the candle  
a steady flame  
in the clear glass jar  
starts to sputter  
drowns  
in a pool  
of melting wax  
I am left in the dark  
again

and grateful  
for that brief light  
I recall  
its glowing warmth

There will be other  
candles—  
lights  
in corner niches  
perhaps  
centered  
upon the table

Different in shape  
color or container  
each will burn  
from flicker to flame  
to flicker and final smoke

Again I'll see the darkness  
and praise what was.

## Adverbially

Whenever the time  
Wherever the place  
Whomever I kiss  
I still see your face.

His lips are not yours  
His taste's not the same  
Though hugs feel alike  
He hasn't your name.

He isn't my love  
He'll never be true  
But for the time being,  
He'll probably do.

## Re-boot

Hit the stop button!  
I want to do it again  
I want to rewind,  
replay and feel it once more.

The boy unwraps the package—  
eyes widen as the paper peels backward,  
the box flaps bend—  
the toy jeep is revealed.  
Its doors open and close, tires spin,  
steering wheel turns, windshield flips forward.

*Re-wrap it Daddy, I want to open it again*

## Touring the Boroughs

First wife-tall blonde from the Bronx  
(they lasted 7 years)

Second-hourglass brunette from Brooklyn  
(14 anniversaries together)

Third-petite redhead from Queens  
(married 10 years, separated 6)

Now Suzy from Manhattan-medium-height, gray-haired,  
smile and street sense familiar as a New York bagel.

"Marry me," he entreated —  
this might be his last chance  
for forever love.

After all, Staten Island isn't *really* New York.

## **Odalisque**

The dog on its back  
lying in the sun-  
unembarrassed  
in such voluptuous pleasure.  
Gainsborough would never have painted it  
but Manet would have understood.



## Summer Solstice

a sad day it is  
when ceremony marks  
the far point of its arc

when the brilliant sun  
moves downward  
toward the winter sea

## A Hymn for Winter Solstice Eve

When the last oak leaves cling,  
tenacious as shipwrecked sailors  
to a drifting hull,  
and clouds scud by  
purposeful as businessmen,

When sunlight crackles thinly  
and puddles shift between two states of being,  
then vision is clear as freshly wiped spectacles  
misted from the past of this year.

In the darkness of this cycle  
we hold close to one another,  
share fires of love  
and trust the return of the world.

For this season of the leavings  
and its seed of the future  
we sing.

## Sacred Spaces

Those sweet spots of safety —  
For some they are  
carefully chosen ornaments  
arranged in reverent semi-circle.

For others, a medley:  
paper-strewn desktops,  
indented couch cushions,  
kitchenware in glistening array —  
the locus of familiar coziness.

For me there are no sacred spaces,  
only sacred moments.  
The empty, the silent,  
the unpredictable and unknown

where beauty sweeps my breath away  
and awe alights  
with the lightness of a sparrow.

## Travel Is So Broadening

In Italy he drank *grappa*  
in Greece, *ouzo*.  
Said he liked to “go native”  
although he always chose five-star lodging  
in third world countries.

At home he dons his cotton *djellaaba*  
when his wife serves Moroccan tea —  
mint leaves floating face up in the glass  
like the urchins’ stares reflected  
in the rental car’s chrome bumpers.

## To Paraphrase Gloria Steinem

*...becoming the men you wanted to marry\**

All my life I have envied dogs.  
They never have long term goals,  
theirs are simple:  
a comfortable spot to lie down,  
food when hungry,  
a sensuous roll in skunk cabbage,  
occasional chase,  
a good scratch behind the ears.

This July day  
I lie on the patio hammock  
listen to breezes tickle the leaves.  
The sun shines. The refrigerator is full.  
I can visit a friend or read a book.  
Daylight stretches long and undemanding.  
I have become the dog I used to envy.

\*Yale, New Haven, CT 1981

## Random Couplets

I'm using my library card  
for a book mark.

My friend is sick; I'll bring over some daffodils.  
If he's very ill, I'll send him a lily.

Don't get a puppy or kitten, you'll outlive it —  
plan long term, buy a parrot.

Digital clocks track time in discrete moments  
despite the fact numbers are only an abstraction.

When I moved into my lover's house  
I sent myself an encouragement card.

Throat puffed, he cited his online sources —  
information is highly overrated I say.

Assigning significance to random events gives meaning,  
structure to the terrifying messiness of life.

## About The Author



Suzy Lamson has been published in a number of literary journals. One of her poems took third place in the 2012 Al Savard Poetry Contest, sponsored by the *Connecticut River Review*. The East Haddam Stage Company has performed several of her poems. Her first book of poetry *A Rose Between Her Teeth*, was published in 1998.

She enjoys visual arts, working in paper collage. Over the years she has made and sent individual valentines in hand made envelopes to numerous friends.

Married with two adult daughters and two grandchildren, she and her husband live in Waterford Connecticut.

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Awakening in the dark  
despite silence heavy  
as six feet of snow,  
I hear his howl.

He may not be here,  
but he's always present



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